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ABSTRACT

In June, 1987, the San Juan (California) Unified School District's Research and Evaluation Department prepared a summary of dropout data available which indicated that San Juan's dropout rate was between 22 and 25 percent over a 3-year period. In the fall of 1987, the department conducted a study of the characteristics of students who had dropped out of the district. Subjects consisted of 103 students who had dropped out of high school in the 1986-1987 school year and 31 students who had dropped out and were in the process of reentering district programs. Most of the students who dropped out had been in the district since elementary school, but had attended several district schools. They generally reported their school experiences to be more positive at the elementary level when compared to intermediate and high school. Many students reported difficulty moving from intermediate to high school. An exceptionally high percentage of students had been retained, with over 50% of the boys having repeated a grade at least once. Many subjects reported that their schools could have done nothing to help them stay in school. The reasons students gave for dropping out fell into the areas of school-related, family, and personal problems. Findings suggest that there is no single dropout profile and that many students leave school for other than academic reasons. Most dropouts in the study reported that they would advise potential dropouts to stay in school. A large number of the students were back in school again or had already graduated. (NB)

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SAN JUAN UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
Research and Evaluation Department

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A STUDY OF STUDENTS WHO DROPPED OUT OF SAN JUAN DISTRICT

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Spring 1988

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the fall of 1987, the Research and Evaluation Department conducted a study to identify the characteristics of students who dropped out of high school in San Juan Unified School District.

Most of the students who dropped out had been in the district since elementary school, but had attended several district schools. They generally reported their school experiences as more positive at the elementary level when compared to intermediate and high school. While some students experienced difficulty in the transition from elementary to intermediate, more students experienced difficulty moving from intermediate to high school. An exceptionally high percentage of students had been retained, with over half of the boys in the sample having repeated a grade at least once.

When students were asked what their school could have done to help them stay in school, many indicated, "Nothing." The reasons that students gave for dropping out fell into three major areas: school-related problems, family problems and personal problems.

Findings suggest that there is no single dropout profile; many students leave school for reasons other than poor academic performance. Family and personal problems, including drug abuse and family disruption, were major factors for students dropping out. When asked what advice they would give to students presently in school, most dropouts said, "Don't quit!"

It is interesting to note that a large number of the students interviewed are back in school or have already graduated.

INTRODUCTION

In June, 1987, the Research and Evaluation Department prepared a summary of dropout data available within California and the San Juan Unified School District. The report indicated that approximately 29 percent of students statewide do not complete high school, and that San Juan's dropout rate was somewhere between 22 and 25 percent over a three-year period. One of the problems discussed in the report was the difficulty in collecting accurate information. In August, 1987, Dr. George Jeffers, the new superintendent, and the Board of Education requested that Research and Evaluation conduct a study of the characteristics of students who have dropped out of the San Juan Unified School District. The results of that study are summarized in this report.

METHODOLOGY

Information from two distinct groups of dropouts was collected and used to help identify the characteristics of students who dropped out of the San Juan School District.

Group 1

In October of every year, information about the number of students who dropped out of tenth, eleventh and twelfth grade is collected as part of

CBEDS.* In October of 1987, approximately 1000 students were identified as dropouts from high schools in the San Juan District in the 1986-87 school year. From this group, a ten-percent, stratified, random sample of students was selected to comprise part of the study group.

The following information is demographic data for the sample of 103 students included in Group 1 (randomly selected from CBEDS). This information was compiled from transcripts, attendance records and cumulative folders.

- Of the 103 students, 59 were male, 44 were female.
- The average GPA was 1.70 (N=53). (C Minus Average)
- The average cumulative units completed by students at the time they left school are listed below by grade level. For these students, 210 units were required for graduation.

  Grade 10 = 47.5 (N=7)
  Grade 11 = 110.5 (N=19)
  Grade 12 = 158.6 (N=28)

- The average rank in class was 302/355 (N=42). This indicates they tend to be in the bottom quarter of students.
- The average number of classes <u>failed</u> is eight.
- The average net attendance (in days) for each grade level is:

  Grade 10 = 132 (N=30)
  Grade 11 = 135 (N=34)
  Grade 12 = 79 (N=24)

California Basic Education Data System (CBEDS) is an annual data collection system of various types of educational information including the number of dropouts from each high school in the state.

- Ethnically, 87 percent of all San Juan District dropouts are white, which is the same as the ethnic composition of the district's total student population. *While ethnicity of the students in the sample was not complete, ethnic information for the total dropout population for 1986-87 was available.*

Of the 103 students in Group 1 identified for inclusion in the study, 17 were eventually interviewed in person or by telephone. The remaining 86 were not interviewed for a variety of reasons. These reasons are summarized below:

- Could not be contacted because they had moved, their phone had been disconnected, the phone number was incorrect, etc. (74 students);
- Declined to be interviewed (2 students);
- Currently enrolled in a district school program (7 students);
- Graduated (3 students).

Group 2

The second group included in the dropout study were students who had previously dropped out and were in the process of reentering district programs. They were selected to be interviewed only if they had dropped out of the San Juan District, had been in the District for at least three years prior to dropping out, and had not been out of school for more than three years. This resulted in 31 students being interviewed and included in the study as Group 2.

Dropout Task Force

As part of the study, a Dropout Task Force was convened in September. It consisted of 25 staff members who deal with at-risk or dropout students and included administrators, counselors, psychologists, teachers and nurses. At the first Dropout Task Force meeting, the group generated a list of possible questions to ask the dropouts. They also identified differences between San Juan's dropouts and dropouts as described in the national research literature. This information was used by Research and Evaluation staff members to develop an interview instrument which Dropout Task Force members then administered to students in Group 1 and Group 2.

Interview Procedures

Group 1 students were contacted by telephone to schedule an interview. As previously noted, most students could not be contacted, with some having already reentered school or graduated. Of Group 1, 17 students were eventually interviewed. Group 2 students were selected by program administrators and interviewed as they reentered district programs. Students from both groups were interviewed by Dropout Task Force members using the district-developed interview instrument. Questions included in the interview schedule related to family composition, mobility, educational level of parents, school experiences at elementary, intermediate and high school levels, reasons for leaving school, present status and future plans. Whenever possible, additional information about the students was also collected, including attendance information, grades and test scores. Unfortunately, much of this data was irretrievable.

Interview information for both groups (17 from Group 1 and 31 from Group 2) was then combined and analyzed. Since both groups were nearly identical in reported characteristics, they were combined for reporting purposes. The resulting group forms the basis of the report findings which follow.

STUDY FINDINGS

Family Characteristics

- Family Composition. Approximately one-third of those dropouts interviewed reported that, at the time they left school, they were living with both natural parents. The remaining two-thirds reported living in other family situations. Family composition is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1

Family Composition

Family Composition	Number	Percent
Both Parents	17	35%
Mother Only	9	19%
Mother & Stepfather/Boyfriend	12	25%
Father Only	4	8%
Father & Stepmother/Girlfriend	2	4%
Other	4	8%

Seventy-four percent of all students interviewed reported that they were living at home when they left school.

- Parent Attitude. Thirty-seven out of 48 students (77%) described their parents' attitudes towards school as supportive or positive. Seven students

(15%) described their parents' attitudes as somewhat positive with three students (6%) responding that their parents were indifferent.

- Family Cohesiveness. Fifty percent of the interviewees said they would describe their families as closely knit. Thirty-five percent said their families were not closely knit. The remaining 15 percent said that their families were somewhat closely knit.

- Parent Occupation. One-third of the students reported fathers working in semi-professional/professional occupations. Twenty-five percent reported fathers' occupations as skilled or semi-skilled, with 19 percent describing fathers' occupations as unskilled. An additional 25 percent indicated that they were not sure of their fathers' occupations.

  Mothers of the students interviewed typically worked in unskilled jobs or remained in the home (40%). Approximately eight percent of mothers were functioning in skilled or semi-skilled jobs, with 35 percent working in semi-professional or professional occupations. Nineteen percent of the students reported that they were unsure of their mothers' occupations.

- Parent Education. Seventy-three percent of the interviewees reported that their fathers had graduated from high school. Similarly, 71 percent reported mothers with high school diplomas.

  Sixty-four percent of the dropouts reported that at least one parent had obtained some college education. *This is a substantially lower percentage*

than the San Juan District overall. According to 1986-87 Grade 12 CAP subgroup data, in the San Juan District, 82 percent of parents had received at least some college training.

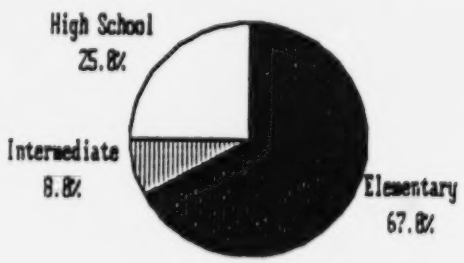
Student Mobility

- Number of Schools Attended. Eighty-three percent of the students reported attending two or more high schools. Forty-four percent of the students interviewed reported attending three or more high schools and 19 percent reported attending four or more high schools during their educational career.

- The average number of schools attended (K-12) was six.

- Length of Time in District. Most dropouts interviewed had been in the San Juan Unified School District most of their educational career. Sixty-seven percent first attended a San Juan school in grades kindergarten through six. Eight percent began attending in grades seven or eight, with 25 percent reporting that they first enrolled in a San Juan school in grades nine through twelve. This information is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Percentage of Dropouts by Grade Entering District



School Level

Enrollment patterns for the general population in the San Juan Unified School District obtained from the Twelfth Grade CAP report for 1986-87 show 59 percent of students first entering a San Juan school in grades kindergarten through six, nine percent first enrolling in grades seven or eight and 21 percent first attending a San Juan school in grades nine through twelve. Twelve percent did not respond to this question on the CAP data form.

It appears then, that while there is a high mobility rate among those dropouts interviewed, it is mobility within the district. Students dropping out in San Juan have been in the district for most of their educational career, but have attended several different district schools.

School Experience

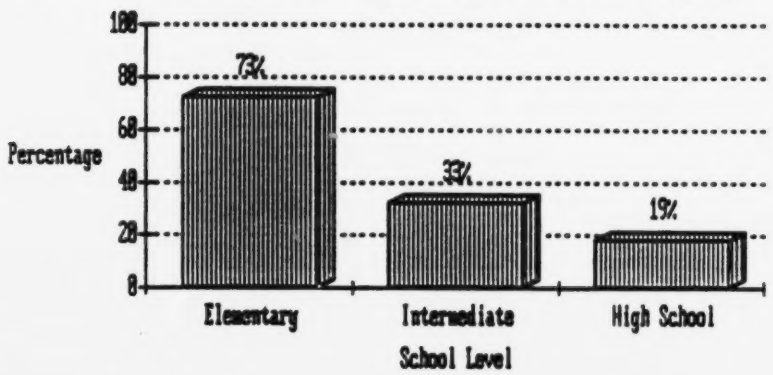
- Elementary School Experience. Seventy-three percent of the dropouts interviewed described their elementary school experiences as positive. Four percent reported them as neutral, while 17 percent reported their experience as negative. Three students did not comment.

- Intermediate School Experience. Thirty-three percent of the interviewees reported that their intermediate school experiences had been positive. Thirty-one percent described them in neutral terms, while 31 percent reported their experiences as negative. Two students of the 48 interviewed did not respond.

- High School Experience. Only 19 percent of the students interviewed described their high school experiences in positive terms. An additional nine percent described them as neutral, while 54 percent responded in negative terms. Four students reported that they did not remember or did not know.

  These findings are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Percentage of Students Reporting A Positive School Experience



- Transitions. When asked about the transition from elementary to intermediate school, ten students out of 46 (22%) reported that the transition had been difficult. Thirty-six students (78%) reported that they had little or no difficulty making the transition.

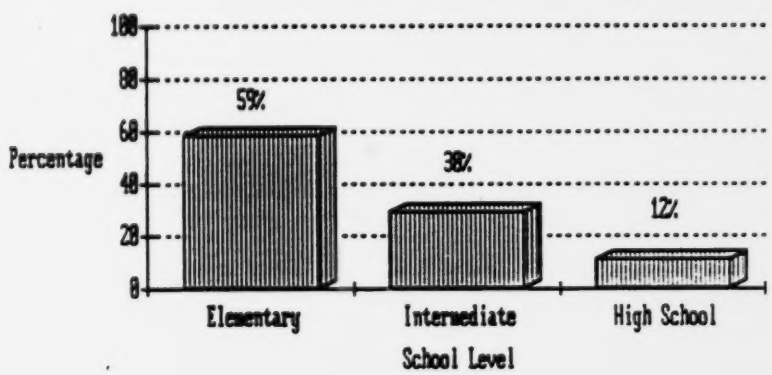
  When asked to describe the transition from intermediate school to high school, 40 percent of the students responding found the transition a difficult one to make.

- Interest. Thirty-six of 48 students (75%) indicated that they had been interested in school or were challenged by school at some time during their

school careers. This was usually in elementary school, although in some cases, students indicated a particular interest in specific courses taken in intermediate school or high school.

- Grades. Fifty-nine percent of the students interviewed reported receiving above-average grades in elementary school. Thirty percent reported receiving above-average grades in intermediate school, while only 12 percent reported receiving above-average grades in high school. Conversely, only seven percent of the students interviewed reported receiving below-average marks in elementary school. Twenty-three percent reported receiving below-average grades in intermediate school while 61 percent reported their grades were below-average in high school. These findings are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3
Percentage of Students Receiving Above Average Grades



- Retention. Fourteen of 48 interviewees (29%) reported being retained at least once during their school careers. Fifty-two percent of the boys interviewed had been retained compared to 21 percent of the girls.

It is important to note that over 70 percent of these retentions were made after the third grade. Research suggests that retentions made after the early primary grades often have a negative effect on student performance. Most retentions (over 80%) in the general population of San Juan Unified students occur in Kindergarten or Grade 1.

- Important People. When asked if there had been specific teachers or other individuals who had expressed concern or who had shown they cared about the student, 80 percent reported that there had been at least one person who had cared for them somewhere in their school experience. This was typically a teacher (or teachers). Counselors and administrators were also frequently mentioned.

Reasons for Dropping Out

- A wide variety of reasons were given by the students for dropping out. However, they all could be grouped into three major categories: school related problems, family problems, and personal problems. In many cases, students reported difficulties in more than one of these areas. Students' reasons for leaving school are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Reasons for Leaving School

1. School Related Problems	21 Total Responses
Attendance	3
Difficult School Work	2
Rules	1
Peers	2
Keeping Up	4
Boredom	3
Lack of Support	2
Graduation Requirements	1
School Choice	3
2. Family Problems	16 Total Responses
Relationships	9
Care for Siblings	2
Care for Parents	1
Frequent Moving	1
Lack of Support	3
3. Personal Problems	28 Total Responses
Pregnancy	4
Marriage	2
Drugs	6
Physical/Illness	3
Relationships	5
Need to Work/Money	6
Poor Self Esteem	2

Note: Some students listed more than one reason.

Contributing Factors

- Graduation Requirements. Twenty-one of 48 students (44%) indicated that graduation requirements were a problem. Many students indicated that once they fell behind in units, it was difficult to continue.

Similarly, many students reported that once absences mounted and they fell behind in classwork, it was impossible to catch up.

Current Status

- Twenty-one former dropouts interviewed (44%) reported that they are currently attending school. Nine (19%) indicated that they are presently working, with 12 interviewees (25%) reporting that they are working and attending school. Two students indicated they are neither working nor attending school. No data was available for three students.

  It is important to note that the information obtained from these interviews tells us about only those students interviewed. It does not tell us about the status of students who were not interviewed. Consequently, rates of school attendance and working may not be representative of the total population of students who have dropped out.

- Of those students not currently attending school, most indicated that they plan to graduate from high school sometime in the near future.

- When asked whether graduation was a goal, only six of 48 respondents answered that it was not. The great majority of students responded that they had indeed planned to graduate from high school.

  Of the six respondents stating that graduation from high school had not been a goal, five are not attending school. Three of the five are also working.

- When asked what advice they would give to fellow students considering leaving school, 38 of the 48 students interviewed (79%) said, "Don't quit!"

DROPOUT PROFILES

While it is convenient to view the student who drops out of high school as a singular and unique entity, analysis of the data collected in this study supports the proposition that there is not a single dropout "profile." Students who have dropped out of school in the San Juan District are often indistinguishable from the rest of the student population prior to leaving the school system. In fact, many of these students would appear to be unlikely dropout candidates on the basis of school performance.

Above-Average Academic Performers: Elementary/Intermediate

For example, of the 48 students interviewed in the present study, 11 had records of above-average academic performance in both elementary and junior high school. In fact, three students reported being in gifted programs in elementary school.

These above-average students were typically involved in extracurricular activities at school or community and church activities outside of school. All reported that they had found school interesting and challenging (usually in elementary school); however, six of the 11 students interviewed said they had difficulty making the transition from intermediate school to high school.

High school grades for six of this group of students were below-average or failing. Two reported average grades, with a third student showing above-average high school grades. There was no information about high school grades for two of the 11 students.

Most reported attending only one elementary school and one junior high school during their school career.

Typically, at least one parent of these students was working in a semi-professional or professional occupation.

Reasons for leaving school prior to graduation were varied and ranged from boredom and disinterest to the need to provide childcare for younger siblings. When asked what the school could have done differently, four of the 11 interviewees responded that there was nothing the school could have done. Three students said the school needed to be more supportive and understanding.

Above-Average Academic Performers: High School

A second group of unlikely appearing dropout candidates are those students who were receiving good grades in high school at the time they dropped out. In the present sample of 48 interviewees, five students fall into this category. While five students is too few to provide representative information, it does suggest, again, that all students do not fall into the "failing student" stereotype.

It appears that students in this group have backgrounds similar to the group described previously. All five reported positive elementary school experiences, more difficulty with intermediate school, and a negative high school experience, with the exception of one student who described her high school

experience as "great" until she "slacked off." Each reported that graduation had been a goal.

When asked why they left school prior to graduation, one student left because of pregnancy, another left because of problems with drugs and family conflict, a third student dropped out to go to work, a fourth student indicated that she left because of health problems and difficulty keeping up with school work, and the last student quit school because of the large number of units she still needed to graduate. (This student had transferred in to San Juan from out of state.)

Poor Academic Performers

Three students out of the 48 interviewed reported difficulty with school from the outset. These students showed below-average academic performance in elementary school which persisted through intermediate and high school. Each of these students reported that elementary school had been a negative experience. When asked to describe the reason(s) for their responses, one student reported having a weight problem of which the other students made fun, another reported being bullied by other students, and the third student said she was "pushed out" and "never accepted" by the other children. However, medical problems, difficulty keeping up with the other students academically and personal problems at home were also mentioned.

While one student reported attending one elementary school, the other two students reported attending three and six elementary schools. All three reported attending three or more high schools.

Two of the three students responded to the question, "Why did you leave school?" Both mentioned drugs as one of the reasons. In addition, one student reported getting married, and the other responding to the question said that she had run away from home.

When asked for suggestions or comments, these two students said that more personal attention and understanding and having someone who really cared would have helped them.

Major Health/Personal/Family Problems

Twenty of the 48 students interviewed reported that they left school because of major health, personal or family problems. These problems fell into six major categories:

- Health/medical
- Pregnancy
- Marriage
- Working
- Drugs
- Personal/Family (Running away, family conflict, etc.)

These students generally described their high school experience more positively than the general sample of students interviewed. Of the 19 students in this group that responded, 47 percent described their high school experience as positive or neutral (compared to 25 percent in the remaining sample). Thirty-seven percent described it as negative (61 percent of the remaining sample described their high school experience as negative).

All students except one responded that high school graduation had been a goal.

Eight of 20 students (40%) responded that graduation requirements were a problem for them. Three of these students specifically stated that too many units were required for graduation. For the remaining 60 percent, graduation requirements appeared to present no special difficulty.

When asked what the school could have done differently, nine students (45%) said the school could have done nothing differently. Six (30%) responded that the school could have provided more personal attention, assistance or support.

Of 17 students responding, all said that they planned to graduate from high school within the next several years. At present, 14 students are attending school. Six of these are working as well. Only one student responded that he was neither attending school nor working.

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